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DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

MEMORANDUM

To Principals of Collegiate Institutes, Vocational, High and Continuation Schools

Re Departmental Examinations in 1945 in Upper School English

The change in the Course of Study in Upper School English, allowing a selection of work to be made from a prescribed list, became effective with the 1944 examination. The prescription for the 1945 examination has already appeared in Circular 58. No extension of this type of prescription, beyond the selection of one Shakespearean play from a list of nine, is contemplated for the 1946 examination.

In the light of the experience in 1944 with the new type examination made necessary by the change in prescription, it seems advisable to repeat part of what was said by way of guidance in last year's circular on Departmental Examinations in Upper School English, and to add some comment on the 1944 paper. On the whole the answers to the questions on Shakespeare were quite as satisfactory as they were when no choice of play was allowed.

SUGGESTIONS FROM H. S. CIRCULAR 4C, 1943

As heretofore, a play by Shakespeare forms part of the work but no one play is prescribed to be read in every school. Instead, each school chooses its own play from the following list of nine: *Romeo and Juliet; Richard II; Henry IV, Part I; Henry V; Julius Caesar; Hamlet; Macbeth; King Lear; The Tempest.* In consequence of this new freedom of choice, there will have to be a marked change in the type of examination question set on Shakespeare. For example, the familiar formula, "Name the speaker, state the circumstances of the speech, and explain the italicized parts", can no longer be used, since there would have to be nine passages, one

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from each of the nine possible plays. Nine passages would make the paper unwieldy and confusing.

The absence of such questions from future papers, however, does not mean that candidates may from now on neglect the careful study of the text. It does mean that the examiner will have to find equally exacting questions that are applicable to all nine plays. Everyone familiar with the problem is well aware that the examiner's task will not be easy. However, it need not be so difficult as many critics imagine. Examination papers based on a wide option of choice in the texts to be studied have been used for many years in Great Britain and the United States. With the experience of examining boards in these countries to guide him, an examiner in Ontario should be able to set a paper that will be satisfactory to mark and dependable as a test of the candidate's understanding of the play.

As stated above, the candidate should be prepared for a question on the language of the play. It is not difficult to devise language questions that are applicable to most or even to all the plays listed. For instance, there might be a question like this: "Give three examples, from the play you studied, of words, phrases, or expressions that are still used but have not the same meaning now as when Shakespeare used them. Give the present and the Shakespearean meaning of each example you use." This should not be understood to mean an unduly detailed study of words and expressions peculiar to the time of Shakespeare. Again, a question might easily be framed on the humour derived from the misuse or misunderstanding of words or expressions. Such a question could not be answered, however, from every play, though it would be easy for those candidates who had studied any of the several plays in which such humorous effects are prominent. The examiner, in all probability, will find it convenient, and perhaps necessary, to have an (a) and a (b) part in each of the two questions that are usually set on Shakespeare. If a candidate finds it difficult or even impossible to answer (a) on the basis of the play he studied, he will find that (b) contains a question he should be able to answer.

Questions on structure are fairly easy to find. "Show how the opening scene of the play catches the attention of the audience, provides the information necessary to follow the story, and suggests the tone or character of the action." Any candidate could make a passing mark in his answer to that question if he had read the play carefully and had a reasonable amount of intelligence. But those who had studied *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, or *King Lear* would have more and richer material on which to base their answers. On the other hand, a question such as the following might be more readily answered by those who studied another play: "Show how the action of the play is developed by roughly alternating scenes in which different sets of characters appear. How are the two sets connected in the action?" These two examples of the type of question on structure or plot are in

themselves enough to show any discerning teacher the kind of preparation candidates will need to make if they hope to do well on the final examination. It is perhaps correct to say that the examination will henceforth put rather less emphasis on mere memory and rather more on reflection about what the candidate has remembered.

There is almost no limit to the range of possible questions on character and characterization. However, it is unlikely that candidates will be asked to "give a character sketch" of anybody, for that type of question merely invites the memorizing of what some commentator once wrote about the hero or villain. Questions will be asked in such a way that the candidate in answering will have to marshal the bits of evidence that led him to form the opinion he holds. For instance, there might be such a quotation as this: "The villain is always meant to be hateful but Shakespeare always takes pains to make him credible by showing how he became what he is." The candidates instructions for dealing with this comment would be something like this: "Discuss the truth of the statement in relation to the villain in your play. Be careful to support your statements by definite references to the text." As any teacher will see, it is possible to find or make up a similar comment on the hero, the heroine, the chief minor character, the clown, or any of several typical characters and then to devise a question based on the comment. The point to note is that in his answers the candidate ought to show a close knowledge of the plot, an ability to draw conclusions from the facts, and an understanding of the playwright's artistry.

COMMENTS ON THE 1944 UPPER SCHOOL ENGLISH EXAMINATION

Experience with the Annual Paper of 1944 has shown that many candidates had not been well trained in answering the exact question asked. They wasted time in giving information that was not asked for and that had no bearing on the question. Moreover, they used long sentences to give the meaning of single words or phrases when the correct synonym or explanatory phrase was all that was needed. Even when they had all the information needed for a good answer, they failed in the selection and orderly arrangement of the facts. This failure was so common in the answers to question 5 that it seems worth while to repeat the question and quote a good answer to it as a model for guidance.

Here is question 5 and an answer written by one of the candidates:

> 5. Contrast any *one* of *Sir Patrick Spens*, *Riding Together*, *The Ice Floes* with any *one* of *My Last Duchess*, *In The Servants' Quarters*, *Peadar Og Goes Courting*, with regard to the method used in telling the story, the kind of story told, and the impression of reality left with the reader. (*Do not attempt to retell the stories.*)

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"Sir Patrick Spens is a ballad, and, as a ballad, is told in simple narrative, interspersed with dialogue. Perhaps we should not say narrative, because it is like a play almost in the way different scenes are set: the king's banquet hall, the beach near the ship, and the castle looking out to sea. The incident of the drowning is told rather metaphorically but no great time is spent on the spot. "In the Servants' Quarters", however, the action takes place all in one spot, and could really be presented in a "dramatic" form. The dialogue here heavily outweighs the narrative portion, while in "Sir Patrick Spens" the balance is slightly the other way.

Both of these stories are tragedies but tragedies of a very different kind. In "Sir Patrick Spens" is the tragedy of men going to their death (and realizing it) and the pathos of the hopeful women is clearly brought out. But in "In the Servants' Quarters" the tragedy is the agony in Peter's soul when the cock crows thrice, and is all contained in the words "his face convulses". The rest is left to the imagination (save for the fact that he "droops and turns and goes"). The story in "Sir Patrick Spens" is quite a normal one for a ballad, while Hardy's theme only at the end gives us the taste of bitter hopelessness that characterizes so much of Hardy's work.

Certainly the impression of reality given by "In the Servants' Quarters" is much greater than that of "Sir Patrick Spens". This is doubtless due to the fact that Hardy's poem is an old tale written in our every-day idiom while we are rather unfamiliar with the dialect used in "Sir Patrick Spens". "The Scots lords were weel laith to wet their shoon . . . but thers hats they swam aboon." "Half o'er, half o'er, to Aberdour, 'tis fifty fadoms deep." But the prize example (varying in different versions) is "Oh where will I get a skeely skipper to sail this schip of mine." The whole of the story in the ballad is told with a "well-though-he-knew" tone, but the jolly, natural atmosphere of Hardy's poem seems to make that old story suddenly very familiar and real to us."

Note that this candidate gives one paragraph to the method used in telling the story, a second paragraph to the kind of story told, and a third to the impression of reality left with the reader. Not one candidate in twenty used this simple and obvious plan which makes it easier for the writer to say what he thinks without vague and irrelevant generalities. The form of this answer will repay careful study.

Toronto, November 23rd, 1944.